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History of the

NAVAL WEAPONS STATION

Yorktown, Virginia



by

Susan Clingan

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THE HISTORY OF THE NAVAL WEAPONS STATION

By

Susan Clingan

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*Written as a term paper
for Government class -
Helena Hansford - Teacher*



Jesuit Mission
1570 • 1571



BAHIA DE MADRE DE DIOS

Jamestown
1507

Landing?
1570

Chiskiack
Site of Mission?
1570-1571

Gloucester
Point

Contowank

Capahowick

POWMATAN'S
VILLAGE

Paropotank R.

York River

PAMUNKEY RIVER

RAPPAHANNOCK RIVER

Kecoughtan

Back R.

Menendez
1572

Newport
News

First
Mass
1570

Chesapeake

Lynnhaven

Cape
Henry

Gonzales
1568

THE HISTORY OF THE NAVAL WEAPONS STATION

The Naval Weapons Station is located about two and a half miles above Yorktown, Virginia, on the York River. The Navy procured 12,562 acres of York County land on August 7, 1918 by a presidential proclamation. The Navy Mine Depot (as it was called until August 7, 1958) was established because the United States needed a storing and testing facility on the East Coast for the mines to be used in the North Sea barrage in World War I.² Because of its tremendous size it was the "largest reservation in the United States under Naval control" in 1926. It is estimated that 80% of the land is heavily wooded.³

Since the Naval Weapons Station is located near the birthplace of our nation, the land which the base contains inside its fence abounds in history. On the base is the site of an old Spanish mission, an Indian village, the oldest road in continuous use in the United States, and also the sites of a shipyard, an ordinary, four plantation homes, and an old church. The area which Wright Circle now occupies was even the site of a small Dutch colony called "Helsinki" from 1640 - 1645.⁴ Let us then examine the history of this area in more detail.

1. Commander A. H. Miles, The Navy Mine Depot, Yorktown, Virginia, 1926, p. 2.
2. Ibid, p. 1.
3. Ibid, p. 3.
4. Paul Smith

First came the explorers, then in another hundred years the first of a steadily growing stream of settlers into the new land. It started in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with that great surge of scientific curiosity and adventure that sent men forth to seek knowledge and fortune and power. There may have been others earlier lost in unrecorded time, but these men left their journals that we might trace their wanderings.

John Cabot, under commission from King Henry VII, left Bristol, England, in 1498 and left record of a "great bay" on these shores. Very probably the Chesapeake Bay, and very probably he made at least a sketchy investigation of its waterways.

Amerigo Vespucci touched Florida about this time and turned northward to explore the coastline as far as the Chesapeake.

Twenty-six years later the Italian, Verrazano, is believed to have explored these shores.

Within two years the Spaniard, Ayallon, entered a great harbor, explored its waterways, and attempted a settlement called San Miguel de Gualdape. Some claim that San Miguel was located at the present sight of Yorktown.

After St. Augustine was founded in Florida in 1566, Menendez de Aviles sent an expedition up the coast to what he called "St. Mary's Bay," unmistakably the Chesapeake Bay. Seven years later the area was described in detail by Barcia: "St. Mary's Bay is located 37- $\frac{1}{2}$ degrees north. It is three leagues wide and you enter it N. N. W.; within there are many rivers and harbors on both sides where a vessel can enter." Indeed, Spanish ships had visited the region occasionally over a period of several years, their chroniclers describing Hampton Roads as "a great and beautiful port . . . the best and largest in the world." Spain had two objects in mind: (1) to Christianize the Indians, and (2) to establish an outpost or fort as a base of operations against the pirates that were even then preying upon the treasure fleets that were bound for Spain from Panama and Mexico. For this reason St. Augustine had been founded, but there was need for an outpost even farther north. The Gulf Stream follows the coast as far as Hatteras, then swings sharply Eastward, giving ships a gentle and steady push toward Europe even when winds fail. Thus the treasure route had been established, and thus a need for a northern outpost.

Now at this point the story of the Spanish explorations at the Bahia de Santa Maria takes on a strange note. In 1559 or 1560 the brother of one of the Indian chiefs gave himself up to the Spaniards cruising in the vicinity and asked to be taken to Spain. His request was granted. He was baptized, educated to some extent, and generally treated with great kindness. As a mark of honor, he was given the name of the viceroy, Don Luis

de Velasco, who had become his sponsor. King Phillip himself took a keen interest in the young Indian, seeing in him a possible means of spreading Christianity through his people. So in time the King ordered Don Luis returned to America.

From here on, the story of the Spanish ventures at Bahia de Maria is taken from a book by two Jesuit priests, Clifford M. Lewis and Albert J. Loomie, entitled "The Spanish Jesuit Mission in Va., 1570-72," as based on translations from Spanish sources. The Indian, Don Luis, was included on a colonizing and Christianizing expedition that set forth from Havana, Cuba in the summer of 1566, bound for the Chesapeake Bay. The company included 30 soldiers and two Dominican friars. Now the friars had come from Peru and New Spain where the weather was warm and living conditions were pleasant. In the outpost of Augustine they had found hunger and hardship. From the new expedition into virgin territory they expected even worse, and they wanted no part of it. The two priests persuaded some of the sailors into a conspiracy to blame bad weather for blowing them off course. Thus the expedition abandoned America and sailed for Seville, Spain.

Don Luis soon returned to Havana and bided his time. In 1570 a new expedition was formed, reached the Chesapeake Bay, explored Hampton Roads, then sailed up a broad river (apparently the James) some 12 to 20 leagues to an eastern tributary believed to be College Creek, not far from the English established Jamestown some 37 years later. The Spanish put ashore the Indian Don Luis, eight priests, and a youth Alonzo Zaballo, along with provisions and lumber to build a shelter in the wilderness. Alonzo presumably was a carpenter. Then the Spanish ships headed for Spain, carrying letters from the priests asking that more supplies be sent immediately. That was in September of 1570, too late in the year for the small band of pioneers to plant crops.

For reasons not entirely clear now, the priests decided to cross the peninsula to the banks of the York. Don Luis knew the country well and was their guide. Thus they settled close to an Indian Village, near the present community of Yorktown, and very probably within the present boundaries of the Naval Weapons Station. They built a house with a small chapel attached and thatched it with the grasses that grew abundantly in the York River marshes.

At first, all went well although the Indians were reluctant to give up their old idols. Still Don Luis was a great help in soothing relationships and in acquainting the Spaniards with wilderness living. In return he asked the priest to baptize his three-year-old brother who was dying. This they did. Trouble finally developed because of the limited food supply. The Spanish group had brought along only two barrels of flour, and this was soon exhausted in gifts to the Indians and in their own daily needs. They tried to barter for

the Indian Corn Meal, but the Indian Supply, too, was limited so that the priests were soon reduced to foraging in the woods for roots and berries.

As relations worsened, Don Luis became restive, then took off to pay a visit to a kinsman a day-and-a-half journey away, and did not return. Finally in early February of 1571 Juan Baptist de Segura, who was in charge of the mission, sent three priests after him to plead for his help. Apparently still their friend, Don Luis greeted them cordially and promised to follow after them. Reassured, the three priests started back to their mission but were ambushed on Sunday, February 4th, by Don Luis and a party of several other Indians. A shower of arrows killed two of the men outright; the third was wounded but managed to escape into the woods; he was followed and killed the next day. The war party under Don Luis next approached the wood, the Indians turned on the priests and hacked them to death. The young Alonzo Zaballos was spared, perhaps because he did not represent a threat to the native religion. In plundering the cabin, the Indians came upon a small chest, forced it open and found a book of Holy Scriptures, a missal, devotional books, hair shirts, "disciplines," and a crucifix. Then, according to the Spanish chronicler, three of the Indians examining these objects suddenly fell dead and the others fled in terror.

It is recorded that Don Luis wept as he watched the burial of the priests. There is no way of knowing whether he was indeed the leader of the plot to erase the Spaniards from his land or whether he was compelled to take part of the chiefs and medicine men of his tribe. In any case, the Spanish youth alone survived the massacre.

Now Spain had not forgotten her meagre handful of colonists, and in the spring of 1571, a ship arrived with the requested provisions. They found instead Indians strutting along the shore in Jesuit cassocks and guessed the tragedy. As the ship neared the shore, it was attacked. In this uneven skirmish, the Spaniards managed to capture two Indian chiefs. One jumped overboard and was not seen again. The second was taken in chains to Havana, but told his captors little except that the youth was still alive.

In the summer of 1572, still another expedition set out for the Bahía de Santa Maria to learn what had happened to the priests, and to rescue the young Spaniard, if possible. In time, they were able to locate him in the hands of a friendly chief and obtained his release. Along with him came an Indian friend, and the two were taken back to Spain where Alonzo was able to give an account of the misadventures to Spanish chroniclers. Among these chroniclers was Juan de la Carrera, whose narrative is the basis of this account.²

Thus ended the Spanish attempt to colonize the North Atlantic Seaboard, nor did she seriously challenge the French and the English when they came.

This, then, is the recorded account of the first feeble settlement along the North Atlantic Coast area, here within the land now occupied by the Naval Weapons Station, some 15 years before the ill-fated English colony on Roanoke Island under Sir Walter Raleigh and 37 years before the successful colony at Jamestown.

Thereafter, the picture focused entirely on the English. Captain Lane of the Croatan Colony in Carolina in 1588 viewed "the country of the Chesepiooks." Then, finally, with the Jamestown Colony in 1607 came John Smith. There had been many others before, you can see; but John Smith, with the time and his magpie curiosity, was the first to thoroughly explore and record the waterways of the Chesapeake. "Fourteen miles northwest from the river Powhatan is the river Pamaunke (York) which is navigable 60 myles, but with Catches and small Barkes 30 or 40 myles farther. On the south side of this river is Chiskiack." So wrote John Smith in recording his explorations in 1607, the earliest specific reference to the York River and Yorktown.

It might be noted that John Smith's first map spelled it "Kiskiack." In his writings, he referred to "Chiskiack." Others used Chesiak, Chischiacke, Kiskyache, Kiskiak, Kis-Kiskiak, and finally the corruption Cheese-Cake. In any case, the Indian tribal name -- given also to their chief -- is generally thought to mean "broad or flat land."

The York is the shortest of the main rivers leading into the bay; in fact, it is little more than an enlongated estuary.³

- 1., 3. Clyde F. Trudell, Colonial Yorktown
2. Ralph Pool, "Virginian-Pilot and Portsmouth Star" (Newspaper),
"Priests from Spain Came Here in 1570" (feature article),
Sunday, July 30, 1961

INDIAN FIELD

Before white men arrived in Virginia, this land was held by the Chiskiack Indians of the Algonquin family. The area now known as Indian Field on the Naval Weapons Station was the site of a wigwam village bounded on one side by the York River¹ -- known by them as the "Pamunkey"² -- and on the other by pine groves. In 1612, it was a village of 40 or 50 warriors, plus their families, under the sub-chief "Ottahotin" who also had control over the Pamunkeys and the Chicahominies. Ottahotin, in turn, owed allegiance to Powhatan. The chief was an absolute monarch.³

Their houses were circular affairs of boughs drawn together at the top, then covered with bark and woven mats. Each house sheltered a complete family, sometimes as many as 20 people.³

John Smith described them as "of a colour browne when they are of age, but they are borne white."³

Their clothes were made of skins with the fur turned inward toward the body. They adorned themselves with rings, necklaces, and ear pendants, sometimes of shells or copper; but the chief and his wife occasionally used pearl ornaments.⁹ The men even threaded small green and yellow snakes through their pierced ears on occasion.⁵

They lived by both hunting and agriculture. Their principal crop was corn which was pounded into meal for hoe cakes, and a cornbread; but they also raised melons, cucumbers, squash, peas, and several root vegetables. This was supplemented with walnuts, wild fruit and berries, fish, oysters, and game.⁶ Some years brought abundance, but for the most part the Indians had reached a balance with nature. They planted just enough and gathered just enough to tide them through each year with nothing to spare. Indeed, they may possibly have been near the limit of the land for their very primitive methods of agriculture, for the fruit and game of the forest.⁷

To the white settlers, by far the most important phase of Indian life was their tobacco. It was taken back to Europe as the "Herba Sancta Indorum," the sacred Indian herb, so-called because of the solemn ceremony that accompanied the Indian use of the herb.⁸ It was John Rolfe who experimented with curing the leaves to take away the bitterness and bite. After his process was developed, tobacco gained great popularity in Europe, ultimately becoming the product on which many of the great fortunes of the South were founded. Where the early colonists had begged in vain for money, it now came pouring out of England; and half of Virginia was laid bare for planting tobacco. Indeed, the original purpose of the colonists to Virginia was to "discover pearls and gold" and "to set up outposts against our ancient enemy, Spain" -- all of which was forgotten for the unexpected wealth of tobacco.¹⁰

Powhatan's Indians were friendly and peaceable with the white newcomers at first. But as white men continued to encroach on Indian land and with the death of Powhatan in 1618, the Indians finally broke out in open hostilities on March 22, 1622. There was an attack on all the white settlements on that day, bringing the English death toll to 347. Only the settlers around Jamestown were able to save themselves. There was much raiding back and forth for the next 14 years.⁹

To thwart the menacing attitude of the Indians, a Court Order of 1630 granted 50 acres of land to any individual who would settle on Kiskiack land for one year --- plus an additional 50 acres for every 20 persons he brought into the colony --- and an added 25 acres for every person who lasted the second year.¹⁰

(Nine senior officers now live on Mason Row overlooking the York River in Indian Field.)

1. Commander A. H. Miles, op. cit., p. 8
2. Ibid, p. 9
3. Trudell, op. cit.
4. Stefen Lorant, The New World; Duell, Sloan, and Pearce; New York, 1946, p. 128
5. Trudell, op. cit.
6. Lorant, op. cit., p. 129
7. Trudell, op. cit.
8. Miles, op. cit., p. 8
9. Smithsonian Institute, Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico,
10. Trudell, op. cit., p. 11-20

RINGFIELD

One of the first permanent settlers into the area was the doughty Captain Robert Felgate, a prominent ship's captain from London. Felgate -- along with John Utie, the West brothers, Henry Lee, and Nicholas Martian -- took the initiative in pushing out into the wilderness beyond the limits of the Jamestown settlement. They gradually took up and patented the land along the south side of the York River, and the Indians were slowly but surely pushed to the opposite shore.¹ In 1630, Captain Felgate patented the land between Felgate and King's Creek, and established his cabin near the bank of King's Creek.²

Robert Felgate willed his land to his grandson, Thomas Newton -- or in the case of his death before 21, to Robert's brother, William. Evidently, the grandson did die because in 1640 the land descended to William Felgate,³ a skinner from London.⁷

William held the plantation for some twenty years. His will was filed on September 10, 1660 providing 20 pounds for his daughter, Mary, if she should come to Virginia within 5 years. Each of his two overseers were granted 40 shillings to buy a ring "in remembrance of me." His son, William Bassett, when he should become 18, was to inherit 100 acres, 1 good feather bed, 1 rug, 2 blankets, 1 iron pot, 1 pestle, and $\frac{1}{2}$ pair of sheets. The rest of the estate went to the widow, Mary Felgate.⁵

Shortly thereafter, the widow married Captain Underhill.⁶ The land descended to his son, John, Jr., and in 1692, the property was sold to Joseph Ring.⁷

It was from Joseph Ring that the plantation took the name "Ringfield" or "Ring's Neck." Joseph Ring⁸ was a Trustee of the port of Yorktown, a prominent man in the community. He it was who built the fine brick house, 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ stories high, approached through a long avenue of cedar trees.⁹ Ring died on February 26, 1703, and was buried near his new home.¹⁰ (It was in his will that we find the first mention of the name "Ringfield.")

From there the house passed down through many hands. In 1772, it belonged to Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hill;¹² and in 1820 the plantation belonged to a Baptist preacher, Scervant Jones.¹¹ He, in turn, mortgaged the property to William Waller. Although there is no record of Jones' selling the house, records do tell us that Thomas Gailand Linsley owned it just before the Civil War, and that upon his death, the land was divided among his children. Between that time and the time when the government took it over, 17 different people owned the property.¹³

When the land was taken over by the government, the Ringfield plantation

home became the quarters for the first Inspector of Ordnance (the commanding officer.) This officer moved his quarters to a new house at Indian Field on October 5, 1920,⁷ and Ringfield burned to the ground two months later on December 14, 1920.

(Mr. Elbert Cox, the park historian for the Yorktown area, felt that the house that burned may have been more recent (1840), but built upon the foundations of an older house.¹⁵ If so, I could find no record to indicate that Joseph Ring's house had been destroyed. Perhaps it had just been altered by succeeding generations to look like a Victorian house.)

1. Trudell, op. cit., p. 31-36
2. Naval Weapons Station, Administrative Building, "Bellfield and Ringfield"
3. Trudell, op. cit.
4. Miles, op. cit., p. 14
5. York County Records, Will of William Felgate
6. Miles, op. cit., p. 14
7. Naval Weapons Station, Administrative Building, "Bellfield"
"Digges House," R. A. Lancaster, Jr., Historic Virginia Houses and Churches, 1915, J. B. Lippincott, c., p. 40
8. "Bellfield - Ringfield," op. cit.
9. Trudell, op. cit.
10. "Bellfield - Ringfield," op. cit.
11. Trudell, op. cit.
12. R. A. Lancaster, Jr., op. cit., p. 40
13. "Bellfield - Ringfield," op. cit.
14. Miles, op. cit., p. 14
15. "Bellfield - Digges House," Park Historian of Colonial National Monument, Yorktown, Va.

BELLFIELD

In 1630, 600 acres of land were granted to John West eastward from Poli Point on Felgate Creek, and John West became one of the first two settlers to take up land along the York River. He was a brother of Lord De La Warre (Lord Delaware,) the first Royal Governor of Virginia who administered the affairs of the colony in Jamestown during 1610 and 1611. John West built a one-story brick house, probably with gabled roof, on the property.

A third brother was "Capteyne Francis" who tried to establish a settlement at the falls of the James, the present site of Richmond. In 1609, John Smith sent "Capteyne Francis with one hundrethe and fortye men up to the falles with sixe monthes victewells to inhabitt there." A fort was built, but West and the Honorable George Percy quarrelled over a name for the fort. Percy wanted to call it "Fort Lawares" in honor of Lord Delaware. Francis, on the other hand, had no intention of sharing the glory with his older brother; instead he favored the name "West Fort." Men took sides; open violence broke out; and Captain John Smith had to come on the run from Jamestown to settle the dispute. West took up his argument with Smith, too; and rather than yield to a subordinate, Smith abandoned the entire project. Thus ended any attempt to settle at "the falles." These seem small grievances for grown men, but the trials and frustrations of colonizing a hostile land were such as to aggravate all their petty differences.

In 1632 or 1633, a son and namesake was born to John West, and the father was granted 2000 acres "in right of his son being the first born Christian in Chiskiack." The son inherited all his father's pioneering instincts and his uncle's independence of spirit. He became president of the King's Council and founded the town of West Point. Col. John West later became a follower of Bacon the Rebel and revolted against Governor Berkeley. For his part in the rebellion, he was deprived of all his land and fortune; but because he was the sole survivor of the "noble family of West" and in recognition of the distinguished service to Virginia by his father and two uncles, his life was spared, one of the very few participants to be pardoned by Governor Berkeley.

This did not involve the property on the York River, however. On September 11, 1650, Captain John West, the father, and his wife, Anne, sold the plantation (1250 acres including the manor house) to Edward Digges and moved to West Point. (There are discrepancies here in the number of acres involved. I do not know the reason. Some property may have been forfeited, or the figures may not have been accurate.)

That first manor house, built in the 17th. century by John West, was 47 feet long by 34 feet wide, built of brick laid up in Flemish bond with glazed headers. The brick foundations were 28 inches thick. It had a full basement paved with square brick tiles. The house stood about 700 feet back and facing

the river with a private road from the entrance gate on the county road to the river. Three or four mulberry trees grew near the foundation of the old house.

Edward Digges was the son of Sir Dudley. In 1630, King Charles had appointed Sir Dudley to a Council of Superintendence over Virginia empowered to ascertain conditions in the colony. Thus Edward undoubtedly knew of the conditions before he came to the wilderness.

On November 22, 1654, Edward Digges was appointed a member of the Council, and on March 30 of the following year the assembly appointed him Governor to succeed Richard Bennett, the second of three Puritans to hold the office under Cromwell. During his term of office he received a salary of 25,000 pounds of tobacco worth 250 pounds Sterling, plus duties levied from the master of vessels --- called "castle duties," and marriage license fees. He served as governor until March 13, 1657.

After his term of governor, he was sent to England in 1655 as the agent of the colony. Digges was well-liked by the colonists who testified in a letter to Cromwell that he had managed the government in Virginia with "much moderation, prudence, and justice." In England, he persuaded the merchants to pay a higher price for premium tobacco instead of a standard price for all. Thus he encouraged planters to increase the quality instead of the quantity of their product. Indeed, his own plantation produced some of the colony's finest tobacco, the famous "E. D." (Edward Digges) tobacco. The land was even known as the "E. D. Plantation" until it was sold by William Jr., over a hundred years later in 1787.

Digges believed in the rotation and diversity of crops. He also became interested in silk culture, and on his plantation experimented with raising silk worms. He was the driving force behind an act that passed the assembly stating that for every 100 acres in fee simple, the land owner was required to plant 10 mulberry trees. Further, a bounty of "Five thousand pounds of tobacco out of the public levie" was offered to "what person soever should first make 100 pounds of wound silk in one year within the colony." The silk industry proved a failure, but the white mulberry trees persisted until killed by a blight not so long ago.

When Edward Digges died, a massive stone was erected over his grave. The stone still stands near the site of the house. It reads:

"EDWARD DIGGES, ESQ.

Sonne of Dudley Digges of Chilham in Kent Kn and
Bar Master of the Rolles in the reign of King Charles
the First

He departed this life 15th of March 1674/5 in the LV
year of his age, one of his Majesty's Council for
this his Collony of Virginia.

A gentlemen of most commendable parts
and ingenuity, the only introducer and
promoter of the SILK manufacture
in this colonie. And in every thing
else a pattern worthy of all
Pious Imitation. He had issue
6 sonne and 7 daughters by the
body of ELIZABETH his wife who of
her conjugal affection hath
dedicated to him this Memorial."

His wife, Elizabeth, survived until 1691, outliving her husband, and all but three of her thirteen children. At her death, the son-in-law, Capt. Francis Page, petitioned the court for a division of the estate in behalf of his daughter, Elizabeth. Joseph Ring of Ringfield was appointed by the court to assist in the division, and the inventory was listed in York County Records on August 24, 1692. The inventory lists the "Indian Field Quarters," the "New Ground Quarters," the "Home Quarters," 108 slaves. (Again it mentions 36 slaves, including one Indian, Kate. These may have been house servants. I do not know whether or not they were included in the 108 figure.) The manor house and plantation and all furnishings of the manor house with its "hall parlor, yellow passage, yellow roome, large roome against ye yellow roome, ye back rooms against ye large roome, the red roome, the garretts, the back roome, the sellar and the kitching" --- the largest personal estate inventoried in York County subsequent to 1696.

(It is astounding in what detail the old inventories and wills were written. Dudley Digges, second son of Governor Edward, lists 10 pounds sterling to Mrs. Whitby to buy her mourning. The inventory for Anne Digges on January 24, 1776 lists, among other things, 1 lb. brown thread, 3 loaves Dble. sugar (32½ lb.), 1 bed pan, and 3 chamber pots.)

Some time in the middle of the 18th century, the original manor house was destroyed by fire; the ruins were razed; and a second home was built near by. The first occupant of that new house may have been Cole Digges who died in 1744 or his eldest son, Col. E. Digges who died in 1789. The new house was described as a tall, two-story and attic frame structure, with a big fireplace and chimney at either end, and a basement underneath running the full length of the house. There were 2 rooms on each floor, and tucked away on both sides of the chimneys at either end of the building were little closets opening on the outside of the house."

The plantation remained in the family and preserved the ancient limits for

more than 100 years. After the Revolution, the family fortunes declined, and the estate was finally sold by William Digges to William Waller in 1787. In the title deed of that sale is the first mention of the name "Bellfield."

Waller sold it in 1815 to Scervant Howard Jones, and he, in turn, sold it to Col. Robert McCandlish about 1825. At the time Colonel McCandlish (militia) bought Bellfield, he also bought Indian Field. The house was still standing, although long neglected, and was occupied by a colored Gentleman by the name of William Banks when the Navy took over. At that point, the house was beyond restoration, and the Navy razed it as a fire hazard in 1919. Some of the woodwork from the building went into the restoration of the Moore House on the Yorktown Battlefield, and some paneling and hinges went to a descendent in Gloucester.

About a mile from the house toward old Williamsburg Road, stood a mill. The present ruins on the site are of a later date, but the site was probably used by the original Bellfield occupants for grinding corn.

(The station forester tells me that there are several mill sites on the station property. At the commanding officer's quarters on Mason Row, now big mill stones are used in the walkway just outside the house, stones from one of the mills in the area.

(Information given by Mr. Paul Smith)

The site of the Bellfield Plantation was located by accident when the Navy took up a tree and uncovered building foundations. In 1932 and 1933, the site was excavated by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) boys. Iron pins now mark the limits of the basement. They also found a bricked tunnel 47 inches tall sloping down to the river. Chances are that this was a smuggling tunnel for tea and commodities, not slaves. In any case, there are references to such tunnels in other James River homes.

In 1961, Mr. Andy Digges, 63 years old, and a direct descendent of Sir Dudley Digges, was working in the Ordnance Department of the Naval Weapons Station.

Between the underpass to the pier and Roosevelt Pond, is the site of a little brick kiln where the bricks for these houses and other buildings in the area were made.

LEE HOUSE

The Lee House -- also known as "Kiskiack" after the Indian tribe in the area -- is located about two miles off the river toward the center of the Naval Weapons Station, the only one of the plantation houses on the station that is still standing. The bricks for the house came over from England as ballast on the ships. The house originally had a west wing, but that has since burned, and the kitchen was originally on the east side.¹ The house was constructed to withstand the frequent Indian raids, i. e., thick walls and narrow slits for windows.² Later generations enlarged the windows³ to their present size. The principal crop of the Lee plantation was tobacco.

Probably due to a lack of early detailed records, there is a disagreement as to whether or not Richard Lee, the ancestor of Robert E. Lee, ever actually lived in the Lee House -- indeed, whether or not he was even related to Henry. The first says that 1247 acres were granted jointly to Richard and Henry Lee by Sir William Berkley in 1644 for bringing five persons to the Colony. They built their home in 1650 and lived on 250 acres of their land. Both the Lee brothers were justices of the York Court in 1648. Richard became a member of the House of Burgesses in 1647 and Henry in 1651. Both received more land grants. Richard received a grant in Northumberland where it is assumed he moved.⁴ The second report states that there is no recorded relationship between Dr. Henry Lee and Col. Richard Lee, the great grandfather of Robert E. Lee. This source even states that the 7 Lee emigrants to the new world were only related in business and in colonial affairs.⁵ The York County records record three grants to Henry Lee and one to his son:

1. 1649 - Book II, 202. grant to Henry Lee 247 acres of County of York abutting northeasterdly upon branch of A. West's Creek, south east on main woods and head rights, Henry Lee, John Lee, and 3 others
2. 1650 - Book II, 250. grant Henry Lee and William Clopton 250 acres on a branch of the Rappahannock River.
3. 1653 - Book III, 20. grant to Henry Lee 350 acres of County of York beginning at the end of Capt. Francis Mason's land.
4. 1670 - Book 7, 655. grant to Henry Lee, son of Henry Lee, deceased, 350 acres of the County of York beginning at the end of Francis Munson's portion

and adjoining Mr. Lee's land⁶

The Lee House here on the Naval Weapons Station burned in 1915, and was rebuilt on the old foundations with the old pink brick.⁷ The house was kept in the Lee family for 9 generations⁸ until the government took it over in 1918. The family burial ground as well as the old slave cemetery is well preserved. Many of the family are buried in the family cemetery, but because of an odd burial system the exact number is not known. Grave stones do not mark the location of individual graves. Instead, when bodies were buried, a small stone slab bearing the person's name was cemented to a central place.⁹

2. Mrs. Knasel, "Historic Lee House at Mine Depot Links Colonial Days With Present," Virginia Gazette, June 8, 1957
1. Paul Smith
3. Mrs. Knasel, op. cit., "Historic Lee House"
4. Ibid
5. Commander Brooks, "Lee House Material" from Dr. Lee, 9-22-55
6. Ibid, from York County records, 9-22-55
7. Commander Miles, op. cit., p. 16
8. Trudell, op. cit.
9. Miles, op. cit., p. 17

OLD WILLIAMSBURG ROAD

Old Williamsburg Road -- originally an Indian trail and now included in the station property -- connected Jamestown and Yorktown, passing through the capital city of Williamsburg on the way. It is probably not antedated by any other road in the United States. In 1926 this road had been in continuous use almost 300 years.¹ Although the present road does not follow exactly on the course of the old, the old route can be visually traced crossing back and forth and sometimes coinciding with the present route. Near the end of Old Williamsburg Road is the site of one of the first mills in the area.²

The road was used by both the French and American troops during the Revolution when they marched against Cornwallis. Four and one-half miles of the road over which they marched is on station land. The French and American armies separated at the Half-Way House (an old ordinary on station property.) Washington mentioned the Half-Way House and Harwood's Mill in his journal: "the American Continental and French troops formed one column on the left, the first in advance the Militia, composed the right column and marched by way of Harwood's Mill half a mile beyond the Half-Way House . . ."³

During the Civil War, the road was used by both sides. The largest group to use it in this war was General McClellan's Army in an attempted advance up the Virginia Peninsula. This army stopped every once in awhile and dug entrenchment at right angles to the road.⁴ When foundations were built for the present buildings, muskets, and other equipment were found near the road as well as Indian arrowheads which can still be picked up through the woods.

1. Miles, op. cit., p. 17

2. Clyde F. Trudell, Colonial Yorktown, The Dietz , Richmond, 1938

3. Miles, op. cit., p. 17

4. Ibid, p. 18

FELGATE CREEK

(Information given by Mr. Paul Smith)

As you cross Felgate Creek from East to West, the first point jutting out upstream is known as Great Landing. Here in 1700 Captain Sharp, a retired Navy captain, had the first shipyard in this area. At that time, it would accommodate ocean-going vessels -- the creek has since partially filled in with silt.

The first point downstream, and on the west side of the creek is Poli's Point, the site of Poli's Plantation. (No further information)

1. Paul Smith

BLACK SWAMP

Legend has it that Governor Digges' daughter and lady-in-waiting, together with their coach and horses and driver, were swallowed up completely into the Black Swamp as they drove back to Bellfield from the Yorktown Inn. They did, indeed, disappear. But there were a great many smuggling vessels up and down the river at that time; it is very probable that they were kidnapped.

1. Paul Smith

HALF-WAY HOUSE

John Hansford bought 600 acres¹ of land along Felgate Creek from "Mrs. Weston's daughter" early in the 1600's. His son, Charles, inherited half of this land and Charles' son, John, who later inherited it gave a small piece to his sister, Martha Hansford Hill, in 1709. She and her husband, Samuel Hill, built their home on the property. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Hill obtained a license in 1717 to use this house as an ordinary, with her brother, John Hansford, and William Fuller serving as co-signers.² Later on, her brother, John, apparently took over operation of the ordinary, for in 1734 he is the one who took out a license to "carry on the bussiness."³ The place was known as Half-Way House. Since traveling by coach or on horseback was tiresome in colonial days, travelers would stop here to rest and refresh themselves. As noted earlier, George Washington and his troops rested here during the Yorktown campaign.⁴ During the final campaign of the Revolutionary War Washington came from Williamsburg and Lafayette from the James River to meet at the Half-Way House for two days of planning. While Lafayette's troops were encamped near the present Skiffes' Creek Headquarters Building, the two generals planned the strategy for the final Yorktown campaign.⁵ According to some French maps of the area at the time of the Revolution, there must have been quite a few buildings in the Half-Way House area; almost a regular settlement. The property was willed down through the Hansford family for generations until the government took it over about the time of World War I. Although the house is no longer standing, it is remembered by the oldest inhabitants of York County.

1. Mrs. T. E. Hansford, Hansford and Kinsmen, privately published, 1958, p. 18 (York County Records No. 1 (1694-1701,) p. 257
2. Ibid, p. 245 (York County Wills and Orders, Book 15 (1716-1720)
3. Ibid, p. 219
4. Commander A. H. Miles, op. cit., p. 18
5. Paul Smith
6. Miles, op. cit., p. 18

YORK-HAMPTON PARISH

The settlement in the Middle Plantation area was the earliest in the York County. The families of this community banded together forming the Chiskiack Parish. On July 29, 1635, land was granted to George Keith, "pastor of Chiskiack," although the assembly did not officially create the parish until January 1639/40. In January, the act of the assembly stated the boundaries of Chiskiack Parish as from Morgan Creek to Scimino Creek, along the Charles River, and provided 200 acres of glebe land to build a parish house. Records indicate that the act of assembly erecting a parish was often merely the official recognition of an already established parish organization. The first church was built soon after the 1639/40 act. It was probably a frame building.¹ It may have been located near the river in the neck formed by the junction of the Kings and Felgates Creeks.² In 1643, the name of the parish was officially changed to Hampton Parish.³

In 1700, the frame church was replaced by a brick church on the ridge near the head of Felgates Creek.⁴ This church has always been known as the Cheesecake Church (a corruption of Chikiack) and its foundations can be seen today along Old Williamsburg Road. York and Hampton parishes were consolidated by order of the council on February 8, 1706, to become the York-hampton Parish.⁵ For a long time, the minister that officiated at Grace Church in Yorktown had this church in his charge, also.⁶ It was abandoned by its congregation in the early years of the 19th. century. It was taken in 1825 by the Campbellite Baptist Organization. They were "locked out" by the original Episcopalian congregation in 1833, and they built a new frame church near the present Lebanon Church. The old church building stood in ruins until the Civil War when the Federal troops used the bricks to build chimneys for the officers' winter quarters in Williamsburg. The inside dimensions of the old church building were 60' x 30'.

The negroes used the old grave yard after the Civil War. Their grave markers were crudely carved planks in the "shape of the human head and shoulders."⁷

The old communion service of Hampton Parish is still in use at Grace Church, Yorktown. It consists of an antique hammered-silver chalice and flagon. The pieces were made in London in 1649, and both are inscribed "Hampton Parrish in Yorke County in Verginia." This service was given by Queen Anne.^{8, 9}

1. George C. Mason, Colonial Churches of Tidewater, Virginia, Richmond, 1945
2. CDR. Miles, op. cit., p. 20
3. 5., 7. Mason, op. cit.
4. 6. Cdr. Miles, op. cit., p. 20

STONEY POINT

On the site of the present Marine Barracks there was a home known as "Stoney Point," so named because of the daring deed of Lt. James Gibbons, an early owner of the property, who on July 16, 1799 led 20 men known as "Forlorn Hopes" against a British fortress at Stoney Point, New York. Of the 20 men sent against the fort, 17 were either killed or wounded. From this, Gibbons became known as the "hero of Stoney Point." Thus, when Gibbons settled down¹ here after the Revolution, the name "Stoney Point" was applied to the house.

Shortly after the Revolution, John Bracken obtained this plantation consisting of 800 acres, and the home became known as "Bracken's Castle." Bracken was an Englishman who served as Professor of the Grammar School at the College of William and Mary, and as president of the college from 1812 to 1814.² Just before the Civil War, the plantation was purchased by John Randolph Coupland, the great grandson of Benjamin Harrison, signer of the Declaration of Independence. The house was a beautiful red brick structure with terraced grounds extending to the river's edge. Coupland had only lived in the house a few years, when it was destroyed by a fire set by a dissatisfied young Negro servant.³ Coupland erected a frame house on the site of the old one. He later sold the place to E. C. Darlington who came to Virginia for his health. During the Civil War, the land changed sides quite a few times, and Darlington became famous on both sides for his kindness to wounded soldiers. Although no traces of the house itself now remain, its spring is still visible.⁴

1. Mrs. Knasel, "Old Stoney Point Plantation Burned by Slave," "Virginia Gazette," June 8, 1957
2. Miles, op. cit., p. 14
3. Ibid., p. 15
4. Mrs. Knasel, "Old Stoney Point Plantation," op. cit.

ROOSEVELT PLANTATION

Besides these plantations which are well-recorded, there is at least one which is known only because of the artifacts which were unearthed near its foundations. In April through July of 1956, the site of a now vanished Roosevelt Plantation was unearthed about 300 yards from the Colonial Parkway, and near Roosevelt Pond. Over 100 items were found around this plantation site, most dating from 1650 - 1675. Some of the items found were a sword or razor blade, 1625 - 1675; iron stirrup, mid-seventeenth century; tank and portion of a knife blade, mid-seventeenth century; clamp used by a surgeon, mid-seventeenth century; iron spikes, nails, bolts, and chain links; and several pieces of German salt-glaze stoneware. The articles were unearthed with the help of the Park Service, and were dated by J. Paul Hudson, museum curator; John L. Cotter, supervising archeologist; Charles E. Hatch, Jr., Historian -- all of the Colonial National Historical Park; and Dr. B. C. McCary, Professor at William and Mary.¹

This site is known in the old histories as "Bracken's Pond." Sometime in the past, it was purchased by a member of the Roosevelt family.²

1. Mrs. Knasel, "Yorktown's Naval Mine Depot Exhibits Number of Unearthed Cononial Artifacts," "Virginia Gazette," June 8, 1957
2. Paul Smith

SINCE THE NAVY HAS TAKEN OVER THE AREA

Mr. Paul Smith

At the time the Navy decided that they needed an East Coast Facility to test, store, and ship mines out to the North Sea blockade during World War I, they appointed a commission of three Admirals to choose a site. These three were subjected to a good deal of political pressure to choose many different sites. They finally chose this area for two principal reasons: (1) the land was cheap, and (2) the York River is the only self-cleaning river on the East Coast. The land was finally procured on August 7, 1918 by Presidential Proclamation, an area approximately 20 square miles. That includes roughly 2000 acres of water and 9000 acres of woodland.

The first commanding officer was a Lieutenant, called the Inspector of Ordnance.

Building #3 was one of the first torpedo shops, where was perfected the gyro; 30 to 50 women worked there teaching sailors.

During World War I, Building #4 was used to overhaul anchors for mines.

During 1919 and 1920, the old pier was built. That served until the beginning of World War II, when the second pier was put in (1940-1941) and extended in 1962-1963.

In 1933, the Colonial Parkway was cut through along the river edge of the property. The Weapons Station property extends to the low water line. When the National Park Service was given a right-of-way, they were granted a 500-foot strip -- that is, 250 feet from the center line of the road, where obtainable. They have less than 250 feet, for example, where the bluff in front of Quarters A, approaches closer to the road. The right-of-way is revokable, and the Navy did, indeed, close off parts of the Parkway during World War II to use the area for ammunition storage. The National Park Service, by the way, is obliged by the terms of the contract to maintain the steps that lead down the bluff in front of Quarters A, and also to clear the spring near Quarters A at the desire of the commanding officer.

Near Roosevelt Pond (Brackens Pond) is an open area, and a cement foundation now used by Mine Project 4 (in 1961). During World War II, the cement foundation was the site of a machine shop, one of the most modern of its time. The inside of the shop was built like the inside of a ship for use as a training area.

Aviation Field, the wide, clear area near the Bellfield Plantation site,

was the Navy's first land-based airfield. In fact, the balloon hanger is still standing, now in use as a storage shed.

The only serious accident in the history of the Naval Station took place in this area in 1943. A night crew was loading torpedo warheads from the cooling plant when the ammunition exploded. The 100 x 500 foot building was barricaded with an earthen mound so the greatest force of the explosion was confined to that area. Nothing was left of the building but a hole in the ground. The crew of 7 was killed -- no trace of them ever found. The four wheels of the boxcar standing beside the building was left on the track. The rest of the boxcar completely disintegrated.

Windows were cracked as far away as Norfolk. And along Mason Row, the tile facing in the bathrooms was cracked. Still, except for the cooling plant that disappeared in the explosion, no other building on the station was structurally damaged.

MISCELLANEOUS INFORMATION

The first seven houses along Mason Row were built in 1919 and 1920. Two more were added in 1942.

The holly trees along Indian Field Road were planted in 1947. The gnarled old cedars along the road were planed by birds many years earlier, birds that had perched along the fence rails -- hence the straight line of trees.

The Scotch Broom that now grows wild throughout the peninsula is said to have been brought in by the French during the Revolution, the seed inadvertently included in the horse feed.

The Naval Weapons Station, by the way, is the last Navy Base to have had Horse Marines.

When the Navy took over, a provision was made for families to use their family cemeteries within the station property. There has been only one burial since then, however, someone by the name of Gillam in 1923.

The station now includes almost 100 miles of roadway and 50 miles of railway.

1. Paul Smith

Since the Navy took over the land, history has marched on. During World War I, it served as a facility to test, store, and ship mines for the North Sea Blockade. When the war ended, the station still kept its mines; but it also expanded to include torpedoes, bombs, and other high explosives. A Research and Development Laboratory was added. During World War II, it again helped the battle zones by stocking the fleet with munitions. With the addition of newer weapons for modern warfare, the base has expanded its facilities again. History is still being made.